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CHINESE DRUG STORES

—IN—

AMERICA.

BY STEWART CULIN. 1858-1929

Philadelphia 1889

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Chinese Drug Stores in America.

BY STEWART CULIN.

Not the least interesting feature of the Chinese quarter in our American cities are the drug shops which these conservative people have established for the sale of their native drugs in connection with their general stores.

These shops reduplicate the herbalists' shops of Hong Kong, and their native villages. They are usually conducted by a separate company from that of the store with which they are associated, and their supply of drugs arranged on one side of the shop, apart from the other wares. The sign of the company, a green or black tablet with the felicitous name invariably selected for such enterprises, inscribed in gilded letters, is suspended within the shop.

The drugs, such as are frequently called for, are contained in boxes or drawers ranged in tiers behind the counter. These boxes are usually divided into four compartments, and their contents indicated by neatly written labels of red paper, or sometimes, in lieu of labels, a tablet is suspended in front of the shelves, upon which appears a plan of their multitudinous contents. Powders are kept in tin or brass boxes in a drawer beneath the counter; a series of bottles contain nuts and mineral substances; while poisons, and some of the more rare and valuable drugs, are dispensed from a locked case with glass doors. Piled high above the cases are innumerable packages, each with the name of its contents written on the projecting end, which constitute the re-serve supply of drugs, or contain barks and herbs seldom called for by the practitioners here. Space will not permit any extended reference to the *materia medica* of China, of which almost a complete

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collection may be found in the stores we have described. It is popularly known to us through the accounts of travelers, as grotesque and childish, composed of "dragons bones" and scorpions, snake skins and melon seeds, and substances selected more on account of their scarcity and curious origin than for any medicinal virtues they may possess. The results of such observations as have been made by competent foreign scholars are contained in transactions of learned societies and books generally inaccessible to American students, but they go far to show that many of their drugs are not without great value, a large number of them, in fact, nearly identical with those of our own pharmacopœia, and that many important discoveries have resulted from the centuries of experiment upon which their practice of medicine is founded.

Nearly all of the medicines in general use here, with a few important exceptions, are of vegetable origin and consist of nuts, berries, roots, barks and herbs. The subjoined list, furnished by a Chinese physician in Philadelphia, contains the names of the ten drugs he considers valuable, if not indispensable, and gives some idea of the substances actually employed in their practice:

正防童 *Ching fong tong*. The root of a plant.

何首烏 *Ho Shau Ū*. Root of *Aconitum Japonicum*.¹ From Szechuen province.

大雪歸 *Tai tong kwai*. Root of *Aralia edulis*.² From Szechuen province.

紅菜杞 *Hung kwo kí*. Fruit of wild *Berberis Lycium*.³ From Szechuen province.

川杜仲 *Ch'ün tò chung*. The outer bark of a tree. From Szechuen province.

杜菰 *Pak k'í*. A kind of lung wort.⁴

魚肚 *Ch'ün kung*. "Nodular masses consisting apparently of the rootstock of some umbelliferous plant allied to angelica."⁵ From Szechuen province.

¹ Daniel Hanbury, *Science Papers*, London, 1876, p. 258.

² *Ibid.*, p. 260.

³ *Catalogue of the Chinese Customs Collection at the International Exhibition, Philadelphia*, 1876. Shanghai, 1876, No. 3886.

⁴ S. Wells Williams. *A Tonic Dictionary of the Chinese Language*. Canton, 1856, p. 153.

⁵ Hanbury, p. 260.

甘草 *Kòm ts'ò*. Liquorice root.

淮山 *Wái shán*. The root of a water plant.

白朮 *Pák shut*. The root of *Atractylodes alba*.¹ From Szechuen province.

The medicines are all imported from China, either from Hong Kong or Canton, and reach here in their crude state, the herbs and barks in large pieces, and the tubers and roots usually entire. It is customary to cut the former in small pieces, and slice the latter in delicate segments, before placing them in the drawers and boxes for sale. A large cleaver, *yéuk ts'oi k'ap*, mounted with a hinge upon a slightly inclined table, is employed to chop the grasses and herbs in convenient lengths, while the tubers are sliced upon an instrument resembling a carpenter's plane, *yéuk p'ò*, inserted in a long bench upon which the operator sits, the pieces falling through upon a tray placed beneath. A canoe-shaped mortar of cast-iron, *yéuk shün*, is employed to reduce some of the more refractory nuts and minerals to powder. It stands upon four legs, and a heavy disk of iron is rolled backwards and forwards within it by means of a wooden axle to which the operator applies his feet, while his hands are free to perform other work.

The clerks who dispense the medicines have usually had some experience at home. They are paid from twenty-five to thirty dollars per month, with their board and lodging, the current wages among the Chinese here for unskilled labor; but their work is light, and they sometimes assist with the lottery drawings for which they receive additional compensation. They frequently act as bookkeepers, and, in common with the shop-keeping class, are brighter and better educated than the mass of the immigrants. Their knowledge of medicine is derived almost entirely from experience, no books on the subject being used or studied by them and the *Pún tso*, or Herbal, is not to be found in any of their shops.

The prescriptions furnished by the native doctors, which are usually written upon Chinese letter-paper and a foot in length, contain only a list of the names and quantities of the medicines required, with concise directions for their preparation, no date or signature being appended. Upon being presented to the clerk over the counter, he weighs out the ingredients, and places them separately upon a large sheet of paper, going over them carefully afterwards to prevent any possible mistake. A hand balance, *li tang*, is used, consisting of a

¹ Customs Collection. No. 4082.

decimally graduated, ivory rod, from one end of which a brass scale pan is suspended by silk threads. The smaller kind weigh from one *li* to five and one-half *lëung*, or Chinese ounces,¹ and are remarkably accurate.

Various simple expedients are resorted to by the clerk in the preparation of the medicines. Some are powdered in the upright iron mortar, *chung hòm*, and others in the porcelain mortar, *lúi ún*; certain roots and seeds are roasted in a pan, while others are steeped for a few moments in Chinese rice spirits. The package of medicine is carried home to be boiled, and the infusion taken at one dose by the patient. Some *hak tsò*, Chinese prunes, are usually furnished to be eaten at the same time. The prescription, of which no record is kept, is returned with the medicine.

The practice of medicine by the Chinese doctors here is confined almost entirely to what is called by the Chinese *noi fo*, or internal medicine. *Ngoi fo*, "external practice" or surgery, which constitutes a distinct branch of their healing art, is little understood by them, and their patients seldom make greater demands upon them than for a cure for a cold, indigestion or headache. But slight as may be their ailments, the Chinese of our cities are constantly taking medicines. Well, they resort to prophylactics, or try to improve their digestion; ill, they take one prescription after another, and drink quantities of unpalatable tea every night, usually, upon their own testimony, to little advantage.

No less than four shops supply medicines to the little colony in Philadelphia, and day and night their clerks are busy, weighing and pounding and tying up packages for the relief of their suffering countrymen. Nor are the drugs regularly prescribed by their physicians the only medicine used by them; almost every shop furnishes an assortment of pills and teas compounded by Canton pharmacists.

First among these are the *Wai Shang Ün*, or "Life Preserving Pills," which are taken by both the sick and well on account of their supposed vitalizing properties. In common with many other Chinese pills they are enclosed in a shell of vegetable wax, upon which is stamped the name, with that of the makers, in vermilion and gold.

¹ 1	<i>li</i>	=.57984 grains, Troy.		
10	<i>li</i>	=1 <i>fan</i>	=5.7984	" "
10	<i>fan</i>	=1 <i>ts'in</i>	=57.984	" "
10	<i>ts'in</i>	=1 <i>lëung</i>	=579.84	" "

One of these boluses—they are nearly an inch in diameter—is taken at a dose. The usual price for the best kind is one dollar apiece. They are said to be composed of *yan sham* (Manchurian ginseng), *luk yung* (deer's horns),¹ and other expensive drugs. A cheaper kind is entitled upon a printed advertisement, *Yan sham luk yung ning shan po shan ün*—(ginseng and deer's-horn pills for tranquilizing the spirits and strengthening the kidneys). These also purport to contain *yuk kwai*, a precious cinnamon, the bark of the *Cinnamomum Cassia* (?), one of their most highly valued drugs. That used by the Chinese pharmacists here is imported in boxes covered with raw silk, each containing one piece, about fourteen inches in length. The price varies with the quality, from two dollars and a half to five dollars for one *léung*.

Sú hòp ün (rose mallows pills), are taken to relieve flatulency; *king fung ün* are intended for children; *ying im ugán ün* (the well approved eye pills), are dissolved in water and used as an eye lotion; *Shan hau pak chuk ün* purport to be a remedy for a certain disease, and *Shan hau hung ün* (Divinely efficacious red pills), are taken as a prophylactic against the same complaint. Occult and magical properties are claimed for nearly all of these compounds, and they are not regarded with much favor by the regular physicians.

Several varieties of ginseng are sold in the shops. The American root, sold under the name of *yéung sham* (foreign ginseng), is the cheapest, the current price being 40 cents per *léung*. Next in value is *kat lam sham*, said to be obtained from Corea, costing 50 cents per *léung*. *Kò lai sham* (Corean ginseng), is the kind most used here, and costs from \$2.50 to \$3.50 per *léung*. *Yan sham*, Chinese or Manchurian ginseng, the most precious and famous drug of the Chinese pharmacopœia, is seldom, if ever, to be found in the stores. Occasionally one sees small roots purporting to be *yan sham* kept wrapped in raw cotton in tin boxes; but the enormous price asked for them, often from sixty to one hundred dollars for one *léung*, prevents their use except in extreme cases, or as a matter of luxurious extravagance.

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In concluding these notes, we desire to call the attention of American students to the field afforded by these Chinese drug shops for the investigation and study of Chinese *materia medica*. Local observers

¹ Two deer's horns exposed in the window of a Chinese shop in Philadelphia are said by the proprietor to have cost ninety-five dollars for the pair.

in the Treaty Ports have made many observations ; the series of papers now in course of publication by Mr. Charles Ford, assisted by his able colleagues in *The China Review*, are a most valuable contribution ; but the subject is far from exhausted, and the student of historical medicine, who finds thus presented to him many of the drugs and methods of the mediæval leech, cannot fail to appreciate the light thrown by them upon the origin and development of the science of medicine in the western world. How far Europe has been indebted to China in this, as in so many of the useful arts, remains as yet almost a matter of conjecture.







